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ABSTRACT

Born in Cicero, New York, in 1826, Matilda Joslyn Gage became one of the leaders of the American women's rights movement. Her book "Woman, Church, and State," first published in 1893, is a work of feminist history and theory that anticipates many of the feminist critiques which are now familiar: social class, imperialism, sexual violence, and the nature of private property, as well as the nature of patriarchal language, epistemology, and religion. Gage tells the story of development, an archaeological narrative of the manner in which human females came to be defined (and confined) as women, and concerns herself with women as spiritual beings. The church has been, Gage says, the "deluder of the weak and the succor of the strong," a reflection of male dominance. Gage proposed a revaluation of spiritual values that would allow women to decide for themselves what the truth is, based on their own reason and investigation. For Gage, social evolution resembles today's idea of punctuated equilibria far more than it does the orderly, hierarchical story told by Charles Darwin. Gage's book, "Woman, Church, and State" becomes the place in which, for the first time, an authentically post-patriarchal language emerges in American thought. (Contains 14 references.) (CR)

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# "'The Crack Between Nature Illusory and Nature Real': Matilda Joslyn Gage's Visions of Feminist Spirit"

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**Bio:** Hayes Hampton is completing a doctorate in Composition and Rhetoric and a graduate certificate in Women's Studies. His dissertation, *A Grammar of Ecstasy: Rhetorics of Feminist Spirituality*, is a study of the history of women's spiritual writing in English, starring Julian of Norwich, Mary Wollstonecraft, Sojourner Truth, Matilda Joslyn Gage, Mary Daly, and many others.

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In 1871, around the time of Benjamin Disraeli's expansionist "Big England" policy and the completion of the transcontinental railroad in North America, Charles Darwin published *The Descent of Man*, in which he makes the following proclamation on the world-historical mission of Europeans: "At the present day civilised nations are everywhere supplanting barbarous nations, excepting where the climate opposes a deadly barrier; and they succeed mainly, though not exclusively, through their arts, which are products of the intellect. It is therefore highly probable that with mankind the intellectual faculties have been mainly and gradually perfected through natural selection; and this conclusion is sufficient for our purpose" (497).

In other words, Darwin seems to be saying, sit back and drink your tea, for the mechanism of natural selection has brewed, steeped, and sweetened you. Savages and apes are rather alike; Europeans and apes--not really. Of course it is not only technology that makes the "civilised" nation "civilised"; as feminist theologian Delores Williams (and many others) have pointed out, "Anyone who . . . above all else--was not Christian and was not from a Christian nation" (89) was a candidate for subjection and conquest at the hands of colonialist Europeans.

Darwin's erectile narrative of progress is typical of the nineteenth century genre of the "grand theory," and we find such a narrative, in various forms, in the works of other writers of the

time, such as Karl Marx, Herbert Spencer--and, a few years later, Sigmund Freud. The tale of inevitable amelioration was not the only one told in the nineteenth century, however. Friedrich Nietzsche and Matilda Joslyn Gage, for example, constructed alternate stories to confront what they considered the sanctimonious and deadly nattering of a necrophilic society. Although Nietzsche's work is now canonical, Gage's writing and activism have been the stuff of footnotes, if they appear at all, in most accounts of nineteenth-century feminism. Even more seldom is Gage taken seriously as a feminist reinterpreter of the nineteenth-century genre of grand theory.

Matilda Joslyn Gage was born in Cicero, NY in 1826, and from an early age was encouraged to follow knowledge. Gage was one of the leaders of the American women's rights movement. Her house was a station on the Underground Railroad. She was a founding member of the National Woman Suffrage Association (the NWSA), edited the organization's official newspaper from 1878 to 1881, and was both a major theorist of nineteenth-century feminism and an activist who worked to organize women and to draw attention to feminist issues. Gage wrote her own magnum opus, Woman, Church and State, and worked with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony on the first volume of the *History of Woman Suffrage* and on the *Woman's Bible*, an extended feminist commentary on the "good book."

According to Lisa Tuttle,

> In 1890, Gage was one of the few feminists still radical enough to object to the union between the NWSA and the conservative American Woman Suffrage Association, with

> its strong ties to the Women's Christian Temperance Union. In response she broke away to form the Woman's National Liberal Union, which blamed women's oppression on church as well as state, called for an end to prayer in public schools, backed labour reforms, opposed the government's cruel treatment of Native Americans, and in general demanded a much wider system of reforms than any other suffrage association (120).

But, as I have noted, despite her accomplishments, Gage is obscure today. Historian Sally Roesch Wagner, the leading authority on Gage, has said that Gage was written out of history for several reasons. One is the myopic attention historians have paid to the struggle for the vote, which has led them to ignore other forms of feminist activism. Another was Gage's break with Anthony and Stanton over the NWSA's merger with Christian conservatives, which led to her isolation from the mainstream of feminism. The biggest factor in Gage's erasure, though, according to Wagner, was her "outspoken opposition to the bigotry of Christian theology" (4).

I'm going to focus on Gage's book *Woman, Church and State*, first published in 1893. The book, a work of feminist history and theory that according to Dale Spender "has not been surpassed today" (78), anticipates many of the feminist critiques with which we are now familiar: Gage considers social class, imperialism, sexual violence, and the nature of private property, as well as the nature of patriarchal language, epistemology, and religion. Like Darwin in his *On the Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*, Gage is telling a story of development, an archaeological narrative of

the manner in which human females came to be defined (and confined) as "women." But Gage inverts the contemporary story of advancement, employing a metaphor of decivilization and de-evolution. This allows her to identify Euro-American technological societies as anomalous, and indeed pathological, in their treatment of women and other marginalized groups.

In *Woman, Church and State* Gage also concerns herself explicitly with women as spiritual beings. She argues that, without the development of a post-Christian spirituality, the women's movement is doomed to failure from the lack of an ability to articulate an alternative ethical basis for its reforms. One of Gage's main points is that women have been alienated under the rule of patristic theism; to attain an authentic spiritual existence, "Woman herself must judge of woman" (238). Gage writes, "The most stupendous system of organized robbery known has been that of the church towards woman, a robbery that has not only taken her self-respect but all rights of person; the fruits of her own industry; her opportunities of education; the exercise of her own judgment, her own conscience, her own will" (238). For Gage, more so than for any previous writer, witch burnings, suppression of ideas, and the ecclesiastic basis of the legal tradition are not coincidences or lapses of reason, but are part of a coherent pattern of male dominance. The spiritual is political, in Gage's view.

The church legitimates sexist, capitalist, and racist injustices, Gage says, by robbing men and women of free will and by encouraging a blindness to temporal circumstance. The burden, though, Gage tells us, across time and place, has fallen on women,

for they have been consistently identified by church and state as scapegoats, as inferior, lustful, incompetent, and irrational. Rather than being the refuge of the weak, the church has been, Gage says, the deluder of the weak and the succor of the strong. "During the anti-slavery conflict," she writes, "the American Church was known as 'the bulwark of American slavery.' Its course continues the same in every great contest with wrong" (244). Like her feminist predecessor Frances Wright, who in the 1820s was criticizing the religious establishment as a materially-rich, morally poor relic of "primeval ignorance" (101), Gage takes the economic as well as the ethical measure of Christianity, and finds it wanting, not in resources but in what it gives back to society.

In place of the mercantile doctrine of sin and redemption, in place of the worship of strength and the theology of obedience, Gage proposes, and indeed prophesies, a revaluation of spiritual values that will allow women to decide for themselves what the truth is, based on their own reason and investigation. Quoting Lucretia Mott, Gage writes that the spirituality of the future "will accept 'truth for authority and not authority for truth'" (241). Gage accomplishes her revaluation of values by inverting the narrative of progress dominant in her time. She tells a story of history as a downward spiral following the defeat of the "Matriarchate," in place of what Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English identify as the Darwinian metaphor of the "long uphill moral pilgrimage" (76) that by the 1880s had infiltrated almost all popular writing in the United States and England.

Gage's "Matriarchate" exists, as do the prehistoric

matriarchal societies postulated today, in a past that is inaccessible, and thus rich with narrative possibility. But as Riane Eisler has pointed out, woman-centered stories of the past are far more than wishful thinking (qtd. in Stange 56). They serve as a lever with which to displace narratives of male dominance and struggle, and they present us with a vision of possibility, which may be the most elemental function of any narrative, especially spiritual narratives.

As a feminist addressing questions of history, of the material roots of oppression, of spiritual and political paths to liberation, and ultimately the question of how we know, Gage is firmly in the middle of contradiction. For example, she welcomes and uses the new historical and anthropological knowledge that is a by-product of colonialism, even while she deplores the barbarism of conquest. Also, she mediates between the nineteenth century's uneasy view of nature as both real and illusory, a distinction noted by religion scholar Catherine Albanese. Gage wants to subvert "nature" as it is constructed along imperialist and sexist lines--the alleged natural inferiority of savages and women--but at the same time, she wants to embrace "nature," in the sense that she wishes to uphold idealistic concepts of women and in the sense that her spirituality evinces a love for the world. Gage holds, to use Toni Morrison's words, "a view of heaven as life; not heaven as post-life" (19). For her, the world of spirit is not divorced from the sensible world, but occupies a subtler, electric realm as close to us as our shadows or our dreams.

While Ralph Waldo Emerson and his admirer Nietzsche would

hash out, famously, the questions of personal freedom, theism, and nature--Nietzsche did this in language that is sometimes startling in its similarity to Gage's--it was up to Gage to tell a story with immediate liberatory potential for women. She realized, again in a way comparable to Frances Wright, that the paradigm of scientific inquiry, while it had created monsters, could also be the key to an intimate and respectful relationship with nature, to what Albanese calls nature as "an emblem of divine things that in some way actually *contained* the divinity to which it pointed" (82).

Science held great promise at a time when, as Albanese writes, "traditional faith" of all kinds was "unraveling" (80). Interestingly, Gage discusses science most fully in her chapter on "Witchcraft." In her chapter on the "The Matriarchate" she writes as a historian; in her chapters on "Canon Law" and "Woman and Work," she is the socialist social critic; she adopts the prophet's mantle in her concluding chapter, titled "Past, Present, Future." But the center of her consideration of knowledge is her chapter on witchcraft, where, seventy years before Thomas Kuhn, she discusses the politics of permissible and impermissible scientific knowledge. To her credit, she does not assign witchcraft to some exotic scrap heap of so-called "primitive," pre-scientific epistemology. Instead, Gage considers ancient and indigenous magical knowledge as systematic forms of understanding the interconnected workings of the world. She writes, "A vast amount of evidence exists to show that the word 'witch' formerly signified a woman of superior knowledge" (102).

Part of the reason for the witch persecutions, Gage believed,

was the principle that "knowledge has ever been power" (105)--and the erasure of knowledge, whether by the ecclesiastic or colonialist hand (the two are usually the same, Gage decided), is a politically motivated act. "Scientific knowledge in the hands of the church alone was a great element of spiritual and temporal power, aiding it more fully in subduing the human will" (101). Gage employs the figure of the witch and her embodied, worldly spirituality to unite the fragments of contemporary views of nature. (It's fitting then, that Gage was the one who urged her son-in-law L. Frank Baum to write down those stories he was always telling, the ones about the Wicked Witch, Dorothy, and the Yellow Brick Road.)

From her countermyth of the Matriarchate, her reclaiming of the term "witch," and her depiction of magic on a continuum with science, you might get the impression that Gage simply turns rationalism on its head. It's true that Gage's countermyth of the Matriarchate tells a tale of de-civilization in the wake of the fall into patriarchy, but, as Nietzsche knew so well, a myth revalued doesn't necessarily re(as)semble its old self. If we decide to believe Gage or go down her path, we do not necessarily become upside-down patriarchs, bashing males with our female-superior herstory, but we do gain an entirely new perspective on the masculinist myths of our culture.

It's easy to overlook the fact that in his time Darwin was accused of not proving anything with his story-telling; it made interesting reading, some critics said, but it didn't fit the "framework for legitimate science" that historian of science Joan

Richards tells us was in place at the time (104-05). Just as Darwin's supporters countered the charge that he had proved nothing in the *Origin of Species*--by questioning existing standards of scientific proof--so have Gage's present-day daughters been inspired to question male-centered standards of knowledge and morality. Part of the reason Darwin's narrative succeeded was that, while he was writing, Britannia finally had the technological means at its disposal to carry out global despotism, and was experiencing a financial squeeze that contributed to a "wonderful concentration" of national mentality. Darwin and Darwinism became part of imperialism's secular theology. Part of the reason Gage has only recently begun to exercise an influence is that, although *Woman, Church and State* received many positive reviews, her reuniting of spirit and matter sounded to many people, including Anthony Comstock, like the same dreadful sorcery Gage had recuperated as a pre-scientific form of inquiry.

Gage's narrative of the descent of woman demands that we turn our attention to the here and now as the ground of any possible salvation. "Nature," in its contradictory and mysterious manifestations, becomes for Gage, as for Nietzsche, the endlessly desirable mother of chaos, knowledge, and signification. For Gage, social evolution--the ceaseless negotiations between competing ideas of nature and definitions of humanity--resembles today's idea of punctuated equilibria far more than it does the orderly, hierarchical story told by Darwin.

Unlike some of the better known feminist writing of her time, Gage's rhetoric relies for its persuasive force neither upon the

ideals of true womanhood nor those of religious piety, nor solely upon an appeal to scientific rationalism, nor upon the promises of idealism and social reform, nor upon the erudite voice of the Victorian social critic. Gage enters into a critical polylogue with all of these contemporary voices, appropriating them and subverting them as needed, and thus *Woman, Church and State* becomes the place in which, for the first time, an authentically post-patriarchal language emerges in American thought.

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